DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 004 CS 200 516

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TITLE What Contribution Can General Semantics Make to the Communication Arts?
PUB DATE Nov 72
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (62nd, Minneapolis, November 23-25, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Critical Thinking; *Language Arts; Language Role; Language Skills; *Literature Reviews; *Semantics
IDENTIFIERS *General Semantics

ABSTRACT

Discussion in this paper is given to some studies and texts devoted to the study of general semantics, which is defined as the study of language operations in real human contexts with emphasis on the human consequences of these operations. Mentioned are (1) books by S. I. Hayakawa, Wendell Johnson, Irving J. Lee, and Stuart Chase; (2) lesson plans on general semantics written by two teachers with extensive experience in the teaching of English in the New York City schools; (3) materials available from the International Society of General Semantics; (4) Irwin Berger's dissertation, entitled "Improving Composition through Emphasis on Semantic and Critical Thinking"; (5) Howard Livingston's study on "The Effect of Instruction in General Semantics on Critical Reading Ability of Tenth Grade Students"; (6) Ruth Ralph's dissertation, which documents the contribution general semantics can make in the communication arts curriculum; (7) Alfred Korzybski's contributions to general semantics; (8) John Black's award-winning dissertation on "The Effect of Instruction in General Semantics on Ethnic Prejudices as Expressed Measurements of Social Distance, Egocentricism, and Authoritarianism"; and (9) Patrick O'Brien's article, entitled "The Sesame Land of General Semantics." (HS)

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WHAT CONTRIBUTION CAN GENERAL SEMANTICS MAKE TO THE COMMUNICATION ARTS?

by

Harry E. Maynard

President of the General Semantics Foundation

(Delivered at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 25, 1972.)

The language arts skill curriculum has many critics today. We live in a world that makes new demands on all of us. Perhaps all of us suffer to some extent from future shock. The universe is a verb. We have to change ourselves to survive.

To any English teacher it's an open secret that poor language habits and poor thinking habits are intertwined. In the communication arts, not to combine critical thinking skills with language arts skills is like creating an automobile without wheels. A car without wheels won't go anywhere, and a student without the interwoven skills of good critical thinking habits and language habits won't go anywhere. One of the fundamental premises of General Semantics is that you cannot separate effective thinking from communication skills.

In the last several years over sixty controlled studies done at N.Y.U., the University of Wisconsin, the University of

Iowa, the University of Maryland, Temple, Ohio State, Yeshiva University, Denver University, and many others clearly document that General Semantics training can make a significant contribution to the communication arts. The latest studies I've seen show that over 300 schools ranging from the elementary level to the university and graduate level now offer courses in General Semantics, or include General Semantics training as part of the communication arts curriculum.

The sale of books devoted to General Semantics ideas and teaching manuals are in the millions. To mention but a few such as S.I. Hayakawa's many books, Language In Thought and Action, Language In Action, which was a Book of the Month Club selection; Wendell Johnson's, People In Quandaries, Your Most Enchanted Listener; Irving J. Lee's, Language Habits In Human Affairs; Stuart Chase's, The Tyranny of Words, is to sli ht a whole array of other authors and books.

For some people this popularity is an instant putdown, but as someone who has taught General Semantics, I think it's because the subject matter meets real needs and problems. Ask any teacher that has taught General Semantics and I think he'll tell you of the experience of having people say, "Where has this subject matter been all my life?" For me this statement speaks volumes about the state of today's language art skills curriculum.

More and more school systems are discovering that the

traditional language arts program is not meeting the needs of the student or the teacher--headlines, New York Times, Sunday, November 19, 1972, "Decline Continues In Reading Ability of Pupils In City." Major school systems are revising their communication arts program, and are including General Semantics training as part of their program. Recently the Bureau of English of the New York City Board of Education saw fit to make a major curriculum revision and include in the section devoted to language art skills intensive material on the teaching of General Semantics.

The material on General Semantics consists of actual lesson plans graded from the sixth to the twelfth grade on several basic aspects of General Semantics. The lesson plans were written by two teachers with extensive experience in the teaching of English in the New York City schools: Dr. Irwin Berger, now a professor at C.U.N.Y., and Eleanor Freidman, Assistant Principal of English at the Julia Richman High School. All the lesson plans have been tried out on classes at one time or another and have proven successful. Several schools have reported extraordinary results to me.

The International Society of General Semantics helped the previously mentioned program with teaching materials, tests, and films. One set of films will be widely shown on public television, entitled "Know What I Mean". This is a series of six films (16 mm) in color produced by Northern Virginia

Educational Television, suitable for your English, Drama, Social Studies program; an exploration of the relationship between language, perception, meaning, and communication. The teaching materials now available from the International Society of General Semantics runs the gamut from kindergarten to the graduate level. One text in particular has been widely adopted in the Junior-Senior high schools, Catherine Minteer's book, Understanding in A World of Words, having been adopted widely in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, New Jersey, New York, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. For further information I suggest you write the International Society For General Semantics, Post Office Box 2469, San Francisco, California, 94126.

For a long time General Semantics lacked serious controlled studies that tested both its hypotheses and its training. In the last ten years there has been a steady stream of graduate studies, most at the PhD. level. I know of at least five more in the works right now. I will mention a few here, and I apologize for the many not mentioned. One of my favorites is Dr. Irwin Berger's PhD. dissertation, beautifully written, a model of clarity, with lessons based on General Semantics, entitled "Improving Composition Through Emphasis On Semantic and Critical Thinking". This study with its controlled experiments documents in detail the significant contribution that General Semantics can make in a secondary education language arts program. I commend it to

your attention.[1]

We hear so much about reading deficiencies these days, and the importance of getting the student in the early stages of his language acquisition. Here is where the turned off student starts. We hear about "What the Reading Test Doesn't Test--Reading".[2]

The next study I'll mention is Dr. Howard Livingston's, which was cited in The Reading Research Quarterly, "The Effect of Instruction In General Semantics on Critical Reading Ability of Tenth Grade Students".[3] Another study of Livingston's that I'm impressed with is his study, "Semantics and the Reading of Poetry," showing that General Semantics scientific orientation does not inhibit the understanding of poetry.[4]

1. Berger, Irwin, PhD. Dissertation, "Improving Composition Through Emphasis on Semantics and Critical Thinking," Yeshiva University. Language and Literature, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich., # 65-11.978.

2. Livingston, Howard, "What the Reading Test Doesn't Test--Reading," Journal of Reading, March 1972.

3. Livingston, Howard, "The Effect of Instruction In General Semantics on Critical Reading Ability of Tenth Grade Students," PhD. Dissertation, N.Y.U., 1964.

4. Livingston, Howard, "Semantics and the Reading of Poetry," Journal of Research in the Teaching of English, Spring 1969.

What teacher doesn't know about the child who stutters in print--the person who becomes creatively inhibited when he starts to put words on paper. For a masterful study on the contribution General Semantics can make in this area of the communication arts, I commend to your attention Sally L. True's "A Study of the Relationship of General Semantics and Creativity."[5]

The fragmented, departmentalized personality abounds in our schools. I call this disease polyphrenia. Language is a powerful determinant to thought, feeling and behavior. Korzybski, and now a small army of psychologists and psychiatrists (more about this later), believe that what a man's language tells his brain, and what a man's brain tells his language is intimately tied up with both his intelligence and his sanity. Dr. Albert Ellis and Robert Harper, along with many other psychologists, now called the "semantic therapists", have developed many new psychotherapeutic strategies to get at the "internalized sentences" by which men and women talk themselves in and out of mental illness.[6]

5. True, S.L., "A Study of the Relationship of General Semantics and Creativity," a PhD. dissertation, the University of Wisconsin, 1965.

6. Ellis and Harper, A Guide To Rational Living, Wilshire Book Company, 1973 Paperback Edition.

Dr. Ruth Ralph who recently received her PhD. in English Education at the University of Maryland, in "The Effects of General Semantics on Personality Adjustment," documents the contribution General Semantics can make in the communication arts curriculum. If you want a more simplified how-to version of her findings, read her article, "General Semantics to the Rescue" in the Maryland English Journal.

She sums up, "The literature of General Semantics can help you teach critical thinking and can provide many motivated experiences in speech and written expression. In short, combined with your own background and experience in language instruction and your active imagination, it can reshape your whole approach to the teaching of English."[7]

By now you may feel that General Semantics suffers from what a friend of mine calls 'phagacytosis'. That's a common term used in biology to describe the action of a cell that absorbs the surrounding nutriments to survive and grow. Most biologists see this action as healthy and necessary for survival. General Semantics is an open-ended system, and like other open-ended systems, it is capable of constant revision and

7. Ralph, Ruth, "General Semantics to the Rescue," Maryland English Journal, Volume 10, No. 2, pp. 35-40.

modification, and addition. Just for the record, General Semantics is not a creed; it is not considered a panacea by any of its serious students. The subject matter was not only revealed to us by Saint Korzybski. General Semantics, as Alfred Korzybski so often said, is the product of human brains, and as such General Semantics is always open to discussion and revision.

I think the communication arts curriculum is open to just this same discussion and revision. I see English teachers or communication arts teachers occupying a far more important role in the future of education, particularly if they realize how man uses language, and how language uses men. And what an important role language plays as a determinant to thought, feeling, and behavior. And how crucial the use of language is to both a person's sanity and his intelligence.

Let's hear from Dr. Hervey Cleckley, author of the Three Faces of Eve, and The Mask of Sanity, in an early review of "Science and Sanity," how he saw the huge and ambitious scope of Korzybski's work.

"In 'Science and Sanity' Korzybski...has set out on no small task...He attempts to define true madness, and insists that what psychiatrists deal with at the clinical level is the product or expression of something broader and deeper, a false evaluation of experience, a delusional interpretation of man's functions and his surroundings, which is drilled into

all people during their training or education at schools or elsewhere. Korzybski presents some impressive evidence that madness consists of false knowledge deliberately taught... taught in the full sense of being built into the general working of those neural activities which are associated with personality reactions--and that this false knowledge is a sort that makes almost inevitable a way of living that is far from sanity."[8]

The last study that I want to cite in showing another important contribution General Semantics can make to the communication arts is a study that the research committee of the National Council of Teachers of English has seen fit to honor with a special citation.

Before I tell you about the study, I'd like to give you one of my favorite definitions (among many) of General Semantics--"It can be called the study of language operations in real human contexts with emphasis on the human consequences of these operations."[9]

8. Cleckley, Dr. Hervey, Mental Hygiene, review of "Science and Sanity," Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 1943, pp. 298-303.

9. Weingartner, Charles, Committee Chairman's Report of the N.C.T.E. Committee on Semantics in the Schools, 1968.

The focus of such a language study would assign the new English teacher to a far more important role than he has had in the past, for he would concern himself far more with the dynamics of the human meaning-making processes. The study of the meaning-making process I would assign as one of the essential tasks of today's new teacher of language art skills. The degree to which this particular purpose of language study is fulfilled can be revealed in the ability to predict, and so to control, the human consequences of specific language items with a reasonable degree of probability.

"This definition places meaning, or more precisely, the process of meaning-making at the center of language study, with meaning being determined on the basis of human consequences of what language produces."[10]

This leads me to what I think is an important Q.E.D. study of General Semantics in action--to help lick the cancer of ethnic prejudice--John Black's award-winning PhD. study, "The Effect of Instruction in General Semantics on Ethnic Prejudice As Expressed Measurements of Social Distance, Ethnocentricism and Authoritarianism," N.Y.U., 1971. For those who'd like to narrowly focus the language study, how's that for phagacytosis?

10. Ibid. Charles Weingartner.

Relevance may be an overworked work in pedagogy today, but relevance is one of the overriding concerns for those of us at the General Semantics Foundation in spending and investing our modest funds. We supported John Black's study with funds. (He is now Chairman of the Department of English, Darien High School, Darien, Connecticut), because he wanted to find out whether instruction in General Semantics would reduce ethnic prejudice. With the help of Catherine Minteer of "Words and What They Do To You"[11] fame (another best seller), Black created a course of study in General Semantics which he hoped would help reduce ethnic prejudice.

The rationale behind the study is that prejudice is the result of a faulty cognitive process, which in turn is the result of an unhealthy semantic environment. In other words, prejudice results when something happens to the way people think, because they have allowed words to use them instead of their using words properly.

As you may know, one of General Semantics basic postulates is the premise of non-identity, i.e., in the non-verbal world there are no two things or events exactly alike. This includes human beings.

11. Minteer, Catherine, "Words and What They Do To You," Institute of General Semantics, Lakeville, Conn.

We often discriminate against human beings by the degree that we fail to discriminate among them. Or as Steven Miller in his installation address as President of John Hopkins so wisely puts it, "My own conclusion is that we can survive each other, only if we deal with each other fully and always as human beings, not as categories, hierarchies, or abstractions."[12]

I think a lot of English teachers are discovering that "language that produces no human consequences is meaningless."[13] Recognizing this "fact" of life, the English teacher must play a far more important role in the language art skills. He can help his students recognize that "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder," which is to say meaning lies in the behavior of the language user. "We begin speaking as we think and end up thinking as we speak. Obviously we act as we think."[14]

In my opinion a more central role for the English teacher must evolve, and he must prepare himself for the future, for that is where he will spend the rest of his life. As John Black's study did, he must continually compare traditional methods of instruction in meeting the central problems of our times.

12. "Wall Street Journal," March 24, 1972. A report.
13. Weingartner, Charles, N.C.T.E. report, 1968.
14. Ibid.

One of the raging issues of our time is racial prejudice. In the Black study, General Semantics was compared with a regular course in English and an existing course of anti-prejudice lessons from Probing Our Prejudices by Hortense Powdermaker.

"The data, through the use of a computer, underwent analysis of variance computations. Simplified, the results are as follows: In the test battery which tested the correlates of prejudice, the General Semantics group average scores decreased in every instance, showing a decrease in prejudice. At the same time, the group averages of both the regular English and anti-prejudiced increased. Also the anti-prejudiced groups increased in prejudice more than the regular English group in most cases."[15]

Because I feel this study has such important implications for the English teacher and the General Semanticists, I'll send a summary of the study to anyone who requests it. John Black makes no grand claim for this study. I hope the members of N.C.T.E. and other organizations and foundations will try to replicate and test its hypotheses for validity and reliability. If these relatively disinterested groups find value in a study such as John Black's research, they may be more inclined to investigate some of the other areas where research indicates value in applied General Semantics.

15. Black, John, "The Effect of Instruction in General Semantics On Ethnic Prejudices As Expressed Measurements of Social Distance, Egocentricism, and Authoritarianism," PhD. dissertation, N.Y.U., 1971.

What I've mentioned to you today hasn't had enough how-to examples, except by implication. I felt my job was to give you a report, a broad overview of "What Contribution General Semantics Can Make to the Communication Arts."

But if we want a very human report on how to lick the problem of the turned-off student and the turned-off teacher of the language art skills with plenty of how-to detail, let me end with a few excerpts from Patrick O'Brien's article "The Sesame Land of General Semantics," from the English Journal February 1972, Volume 61, Number 2. I can here only hope to capture a small portion of the flavor of it and induce you to read the whole article.

O'Brien writes: "How often have you heard a class groan when a period ended, or get a very favorable evaluation of a course most agreed ended too soon? When on the secondary level have you had students asking if they can come in on 'off' Phy. Ed. days just to watch, or get involved without credit or grade, in a course called General Semantics?"

"If I go on to say I even impatiently look forward to a pleasure-filled but exhausting day in an over-enrolled (1800) high school, teaching five courses to 420 seniors, you'll surely think I'm some kind of nut out of Summerhill-times-ten or on a real 'trip'. Actually I'm a former 'so called' English teacher with twenty-one years of experience and so many furrows in my brow, with his feet on the ground--until lately that is!

"The story behind this remarkable transformation of enthusiasm, enjoyment, involvement, with highly motivated and likeable high school students so many write off as hippy dissenters, TV saturated, permissive, ruined 'turn offs' or dull witted establishment fodder, is an interesting one. Much of it has to do with a seven day advanced seminar in General Semantics held at the University of Denver during the summer of 1969--that and an abiding interest in language and communications which began a dozen years ago."[16]

By now you should be saying enough of this testimonial. What other evidence outside of the work of the Semanticist and the General Semanticist who are interested, but perhaps biased parties, is there that language is a crucial determinant to thought, feeling and behavior. Glad you asked.

According to "Harpers" magazine's Andrew Weil in an article entitled "Harvard's Bruner and His Yeasty Ideas" (and those of his associates),"Bruner's theories and teaching--for example that any child can learn any subject at any stage of his development--have stirred up more excitement than any educator since John Dewey." If Bruner and his colleagues extensive research is right, this would thrust, and I do mean thrust, both the English teacher and the language arts teacher,

16. O'Brien, Patrick, "The Sesame Land of General Semantics," English Journal, February 1972, Volume 61, Number 2.

armed with the techniques and methods of General Semantics, into a cultural role in the communication arts curriculum.

It would also demand that in the earliest stages of a child's language acquisitions that the principles of critical thinking, allied with the language art skills be part of every child's early training before the cement sets, before the child begins to "stutter on paper".

As some of you know, Bruner followed the work of Jean Piaget who has studied child development in Switzerland at the Rosseau Institute in Geneva. Bruner and his colleagues' main work has been researching the growth of intelligence in children.

Bruner's research convinced him that the human being (being a symbol manipulating class of life) makes staged growth in representing the world to himself. He postulates there are three stages of development: "enactive" - representation by action, "iconic" - representation by pictures, "symbolic" - representation by words.

Bruner says the youngest child is able at first to represent his world, i.e. objects or past events, largely by appropriate actions. The infant who loses or drops his toy can only represent it by shaking his hand as if he were holding a rattle.

Next the child moves on by acquiring imagery, i.e. mapping divorced from action. He can imagine things and can copy and recognize visual patterns.

"Finally the child begins to use the most powerful representational system of all--the symbolic, which brings with it the language; he can now employ the convenient vocal symbol 'rattle' to designate his toy. Intelligence depends largely on how well a person learns to use this symbolic representation of experience."[17]

Reading the results of Bruner's research and the results of the people who have done research in Semantics and General Semantics, they seem to converge. If Bruner and the General Semanticists are right, then the role of the teacher of the language arts skills must play a far more important role in the future.

If both the key to our intelligence and our sanity is developing a language that more adequately represents the 'real' world, then the teacher of the future, I'm confident, will be making more use of General Semantics in the communication arts.

17. Weil, Andrew T., Harpers magazine, December 1964, "Harvard's Bruner and His Yeasty Ideas."